

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

No.1 - Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Functionalism

Durkheim is seen as the founder of the functionalist approach in sociology. This focuses on understanding the function of a particular behaviour for maintaining order and equilibrium in society.

One area that Durkheim studied particularly in this way was religious activity. Religious activity exists in society because it helps to maintain the "moral unity" of society.

For example, religious ceremonies among Australian Aborigines reinforce the bond of social membership. The totem (religious symbol) is a constant reminder for the individual of values greater than themselves. The individual is worshipping the particular god or gods, but underlying it, for Durkheim, is the function of maintaining the society.

This behaviour can also be seen in nationalistic and patriotic behaviour, like the Coronation ceremony of Elizabeth II in 1953.

The key to the Coronation service is the Queen's promise to abide by the moral standards of the society...When she does this she symbolically proclaims her unity with her subjects who, in the ritual - and in the wider audience outside the Abbey - commit themselves to obedience within the society constituted by the moral values which she has agreed to uphold ¹.

Functionalism is limited in its inability to explain

¹ Shils and Young (1953) quoted in Worsley (1977) p501.

individual behaviour. It is concentrating on explain the function of the behaviour at a social level.

Social Facts

Durkheim wrote about the way of studying sociology and society. The study of "social facts" must occur at the level of society, not at an individual level. For example, the suicide rate of a particular society is a social phenomena, and is a product of the interactions within society, not of individual reasons. The reduction of behaviour to individual cases loses the essential meaning of "social facts".

"Social facts" exist over and above the individual cases, and constrain the individual. They can be normal or pathological. The former are generally found in a society, and are "necessary" for a healthy society. Pathological "social facts" are social phenomenon that are out of date and "bad" for society. For example, the existence of traditional religious beliefs in a modern secular society.

Most importantly for Durkheim, "social facts" must be studied in a "scientific" way - ie: objectively (but not with experiments). Researchers should look for two pieces of information - the causes of the "social facts, and their functions (ie: the part played in maintaining order and equilibrium in society).

The Nature of Society

For Durkheim, society is a "system" made up of inter-related elements, which produce a "moral entity". Moral in this sense means how people should behave.

The association of people in society produces the expectations and constraints on behaviour. Thus, for individuals to live together, there must be commonly agreed norms and values.

This agreement is the basis of the framework of order. A society, then, has a fundamental consensus underlying it. This idea is different to those before Durkheim, who saw individuals as forming a society because they gained more benefits individually from that than from being alone.

A key concept within a society is the "division of labour", which is more than just an economic concept. It refers to the roles played in society rather than just the job done. This produces a form of interdependence or "organic solidarity" in modern society. Though modern

society has many different parts and individual beliefs, it does not disintegrate because of the interdependence of different elements. Thus the consensus in society is more around general underpinning beliefs than precise social practices.

In traditional societies, the consensus would be around the precise social practices because there is less division of labour. Durkheim called this: "mechanical solidarity". This is based upon the similarity of individuals, whereas "organic solidarity" is based on interdependence.

As society develops from traditional to modern, the moral consensus changes, but generally maintains a form of equilibrium. In villages, individuals work together for common goals. But this is lost in cities. Formal education is important in introducing children to the values of society, and the roles required by the division of labour in modern societies.

Critics argue that this view sees society as a living organism or individual entity that can adjust itself towards equilibrium.

Suicide

Durkheim defined suicide as "every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative action performed by the victim himself and which he knows will produce this end" ².

Suicide rates, for Durkheim, arise out of the underlying structures of society. Different social structures produce "suicidogenic" currents which vary in strength and intensity. Thus the suicide rate varies between societies. The rates are, in a sense, a collective action rather than an individual one. The pressures and strains a society generates cause suicide.

Durkheim proposed two generalisations about suicide from analysis of official statistics:

i) Suicide rates vary inversely with the degree of integration of "religious society"; eg: differences between Protestants and Catholics both within and between societies.

ii) Suicide rates also vary inversely with the

² Durkheim (1970) quoted in Cuff et al (1990) p35.

degree of integration of "domestic society"; eg: marital status, childlessness.

Based on the principles of normal and pathological "social facts", Durkheim sees some suicide as normal in a healthy society, and part of maintaining equilibrium, but too much is unhealthy.

Basically, Durkheim divided suicide into four types based on the regulation and integration of society. Integration refers to the amount of bonding or unity within society, while regulation is the level of "social control" (both formal and informal).

FOUR TYPES OF SUICIDE ACCORDING TO DURKHEIM

	INTEGRATION	REGULATION
TOO STRONG	altruistic	fatalistic
TOO WEAK	egoistic	anomic

1. Anomic suicide

This occurs at times of economic collapse (not surprisingly) and economic booms. Both these situations produce rapid social change, and this creates "anomie". The rules and values of an individual's life are rendered irrelevant by social change.

Gaining a monetary fortune would seem to be a positive experience, but Durkheim argues that such a situation releases the individual from society's "control". This ultimately produces feelings of frustration and disappointment, which can result in suicide.

2. Fatalistic suicide

In a society with rigid "social controls", then the individual feels that their behaviour is completely constrained by others. For example, in a dictatorship with formal social controls, or a small close-knit group with informal social controls. Both cases produce feelings that lead to suicide.

3. Altruistic suicide

Here suicide is a form of sacrifice to the group or society. For example, Durkheim found members of elite regiments of the French army were more inclined to commit suicide than other regiments. The explanation being that

the close bonding (or esprit de corps) of the elite soldiers led to a loss of individual identity within the identity of the regiment. Thus less emphasis on individual survival.

This type of suicide is also evident in societies based on honour and maintaining "face" (eg: "hara-kiri" in Japan).

4. Egoistic suicide

The individual feels no bond with society as there is no "moral unity". This could be the cause of suicide when society is fragmented into groups in conflict with few common values.

Recent research on suicide rates in Britain between 1981-92 has found an association with "social fragmentation" scores (rather than poverty) ³.

WRITINGS - Emile Durkheim

- Education and Society 1956; Free Press
- The Division of Labour in Society 1964; Free Press
- Suicide: A Study in Sociology 1970; Kegan Paul
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³ Whitley, E et al (1999) Ecological study of social fragmentation, poverty, and suicide British Medical Journal 16/10, 1034-1037.

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